

***Miles To Go, Arkansas, Pre-kindergarten:
The Key to a Better Future for All***

**Remarks of Lynn Huntley
President
The Southern Education Foundation**

**Fair Park Early Childhood Center
Little Rock, AR
March 23, 2006**

Good morning. My name is Lynn Huntley, and I am president of the Southern Education Foundation, an institution that works across the South to broaden and improve education opportunity for the students and communities that need help the most.

It is my pleasure and privilege to be here in Little Rock for the release of the Southern Education Foundation's new study called, *Miles to Go, Arkansas, Pre-kindergarten: The Key to a Better Future for All*. The report focuses on the value and promise of quality early childhood education and why it is important for the fair state of Arkansas to dramatically and systematically expand public support for such programs.

See the full report, *Miles To Go Arkansas Pre-Kindergarten: The Key to a Better Future for All*: at http://www.southerneducation.org/pdf/Arkansas_MTG_Report-Final.pdf

All of us who have children or grandchildren or have been around young children know how important a child's early years are. It is the time when the brain is still developing. It is the time when a child learns how to learn. It is the time when a child learns the social skills to be successful in school and with others. It is the time when self-confidence can be experienced and a sense of pride in achievement developed. It is the time when attitudes toward schooling and learning are formed. Early childhood is the most vital period of development in the life of a child. If a child has challenging, positive growth experiences at an early age, they influence the behavior patterns of a lifetime.

Today there is abundant and growing evidence not only about the impact of quality education on children, but the benefits that quality early childhood education provides to the broader society. Children who have quality early childhood programs and experiences tend to do better academically and graduate at higher rates. They earn more than their counterparts and hence have the ability to live better and more independently, pay more taxes, consume more services and goods, and participate more fully in the economy and civic life.

If Arkansas, one of the poorest states in the union, is ever to improve its quality of life and standard of living, attract investment capital, be competitive in the global economy, and live up to the full measure of its aspiration and potential, it must improve its education system from the bottom up. It must give each child a firm educational foundation in his'/her early years.

We are here today to celebrate the progress that Arkansas has made in developing high standards to assure quality pre-school programs; in expanding publicly supported services; and in planning for the future with clear minds a sense of purpose. In a real way, Arkansas is pacesetter in the area of quality early childhood. We salute the visionary leaders who have brought the state thus far along the way.

But we are also here to say that Arkansas still has many miles to go. The challenge this state faces and must come to terms with is the need to ensure that all children who would benefit from such services, especially low income children, receive them. As of the beginning of 2006, Arkansas had approximately 14,360 Pre-K students throughout the state. This number, as SEF's report notes, represents only 30 percent of the 3 and 4 year old children eligible by law and only 20 percent of all 3 and 4 year olds in the state. Pre-K programs cover half or more of eligible children in only 8 counties. At the other end of the spectrum, 30 counties have less than 20 percent of eligible children enrolled in Pre-K; 7 counties have no children in Pre-K as of 2006. The state's low levels of coverage of eligible children hobble efforts to improve the level of achievement in education statewide and spur economic progress. Simply put, by serving less than 1 out of 3 in the eligible population, the needs of the mass of the state's young children are not being met.

What is to be done? How can this gap be closed? There must be sustainable and adequate funding; more and better teacher preparation; effective coordination between and among agencies of government and active efforts to ensure high quality services. Arkansas needs to step up its pace of coverage and commitment to quality Pre-k services. It is as simple as that.

In the Southern Education Foundation's report released here today, we provide the evidence of the effectiveness of quality early childhood programs in student success. We document in cost-benefit terms what is at stake for individuals and all of the people of the states. We show, county by county the areas of greatest need. And we outline measures that, if pursued, could significantly advance the economic future of the state. The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

Little children are vulnerable. They are innocents just beginning life. They are there to be molded and guided and need help to become productive caring adults. They need and deserve more and better education if they and we are to have bright futures.

As those in positions of leadership make decisions about who and what is important and deserving of support, let us hope that they remember “the least of these, our children” and do right by them.

The *Miles to Go, Arkansas* report is a call to action to leaders to stand up for little children. It is a call to action to parents and grandparents to stand up for little children and help them in a powerful way through expended quality pre-school services. It is a call to business leadership to press for an investment in little children that will yield rich economic returns over time. *Miles to Go, Arkansas* is a clarion call to all of the good people of Arkansas to help little children who can't help themselves. Their future is in our hands. What we do today matters.

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